

**Health Care for the Homeless Network**

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[www.kingcounty.gov/health](http://www.kingcounty.gov/health)

**FAQ Sheet on Influenza H1N1, aka Swine Flu.  
For Shelter and Other Homeless Services Providers in Seattle & King County  
May 26, 2009**

**What is influenza H1N1 or “swine flu”?**

The influenza or flu outbreak we are currently experiencing is due to a newly emerged flu virus that started in pigs, but has mutated into a human form of flu which spreads from human to human.

**What are the symptoms?**

**Fever** or fever and chills *and* sudden onset of one or more of the following:

- An oral temperature of 101 degrees F constitutes a fever. If a client complains of sweats and/or chills, they probably have a fever.
- Feeling quite sick
- Fatigue, often extreme.
- Headache
- Body aches (back legs, arms)
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Vomiting and or diarrhea (more common in children)

**What should we do if a client comes to us with these flu symptoms?**

Gather information from the client. Help the client sort through how they are feeling to see if they are mildly ill or in need of medical evaluation.

Clients should not be told to seek medical care if they are not ill or have mild symptoms for which they would not ordinarily seek medical care

- Ask them what symptoms they are having.
- Ask them when they first noticed the symptoms.
- Try to gauge the severity of the symptoms by using 1-10 scale, 10 being the worst
- If you can take their temperature, do so. An oral temperature of 101 degrees F constitutes fever. If they complain of sweats and/or chills, they probably have a fever.
- Mild symptoms *without* fever *without* complaint of feeling very sick and *without* complaint or evidence of extreme fatigue probably do not represent flu symptoms. .

**How can we tell if a person is OK enough to stay at our site?**

If the client is in mild to moderate pain/discomfort and has mild symptoms they are probably able to stay at the shelter/drop in.

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**What can we do for the clients who are mildly ill and remaining at our site?**

- Try to situate them in a comfortable place at as much distance from the rest of the site's population as possible.
- Prevent dehydration. Encourage the client to drink tea, water, juices or pop.
- Provide a blanket if possible.
- Provide the client with hand sanitizer, a box of tissues and a plastic bag or lined garbage can to dispose of tissues.
- Provide the client with a mask.
- Assure easy access to bathroom if vomiting and/or having diarrhea. Provide basin or bucket if vomiting.
- Check in on the client every 2-3 hours.

**How can we tell if we need to call 911 for a client?**

Call **911** if the client is

- Short of breath
- Having trouble breathing
- Has a bluish tint around the mouth
- Confused or "out of it"
- Complains of chest pain
- Complains of sudden dizziness
- Becomes very lethargic, drowsy, or difficult to awaken

**Some of our clients are in pretty poor health already. What should we do about them?**

Many clients have underlying health conditions that may make them more vulnerable to the flu and its complications, like pneumonia. Be more watchful of your clients who are:

- Fragile
- Elderly
- Diabetic
- Heart disease patients
- Kidney disease patients
- On portable oxygen
- COPD, emphysema or asthma patients
- HIV positive
- Having other serious health conditions

These clients should be asked if they are feeling OK before they complain of any symptoms and encouraged to seek assistance if they begin to feel sick.

Early intervention is important as the medically compromised person can become very sick very quickly.

If any clients with these conditions become mildly or moderately sick, enlist the assistance of your on site RN if you have one, or help the client call their health care provider for advice. If the client has no health care provider, help the client call a local community clinic or ER triage RN.

If you don't have a health piece on your intake form, you will need to help the client get a list of medication he or she takes and where she or he is usually seen and where he or she was last seen for any kind of medical care.

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**What if several people get sick at once?**

- Question all clients who feel they have flu symptoms as outlined above
- If several people are complaining of similar symptoms, try to situate the group of ill people together as far from the rest of the site population as possible.

**Our clients are anxious and worried, how can we help them?**

- Make sure you and all other staff are well informed and giving consistent information. If you are asked a question you are unsure how to answer, tell the client you do not know but will try to find out, or direct them to seek information or call the Public Health Flu Hotline at 877-903-KING (5464) There is recorded information in English and Spanish. The Flu Hotline provides health and safety information on the current Swine Flu (H1N1) outbreak. If you need personal medical advice, contact a healthcare provider.
- If you are informed and confident, the clients will feel more relaxed and calm.
- Try to get the same message about the flu to as many people as you can at once.
- If you have any sort of house meetings, call one as soon as possible to let the people know that you are concerned about them, and let them know your agency's plan.
- Let the clients express fears and concerns; let them know this is normal and that you want to address their concerns.
- Emphasize that this is a cause to be alert and aware and informed.
- Encourage the clients to seek information from credible sources. (on line sources include CDC, WHO, King County, Web MD, Mayo Clinic)
- There is a tendency for some media outlets to fan the flames of panic, causing distress and worry. Help client sort out fact from fiction.
- Keep lines of communication with your clients as open as possible. Provide informational handouts, answer questions, hold house meetings to keep people apprised of the situation as it develops.

**For more information and on-going updates:**

Recorded information in English and Spanish on the Flu Hotline, 877-903-KING, (877-903-5464)

Public Health – Seattle & King County, [www.kingcounty.gov/health/h1n1](http://www.kingcounty.gov/health/h1n1)

Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC), [www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu](http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu)

Washington State Department of Health, [www.doh.wa.gov/swineflu](http://www.doh.wa.gov/swineflu)